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testament



testament

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*You, who made me stare trouble in the face,
Turn me around;
Now let me look life in the face.
I've been to the bottom;
Bring me up, streaming with honors;
turn to me, be tender to me,
And I'll take up the lute and thank you
to the tune of your faithfulness, God.
-paraphrased from Psalm 71*

Choosing to submit the products of our creative energies and struggles is an act of faith and vulnerability. It signifies that we believe in the validity and worth of our own work; and it exposes that belief to the consideration and evaluation of others. Part of why we create and share our creations is so that we might know and assert that we are not alone. We read to find resonance in another person's experience and create hoping that someone else might find resonance with our experience. It is in this creating, sharing, and receiving that we can truly live out the incarnation—in this process we walk alongside each other, learn to listen to each other, and in faith trust that others will listen to us.

Over the past couple of years the Testament has not had an explicit theme; despite this, a theme often emerges on its own.

Much of the work submitted and selected this year explores the things in life that trouble and grieve the spirit: poverty; hetero-sexism; broken relationships between family members, between lovers, between God and humanity; rape and sexual abuse; loss; and death. In many ways, this issue of the Testament slowly revealed itself as a vivid lament arising from our community. In keeping with the biblical heritage of lament psalms, this issue of the Testament ends with a few tentative but insistent words of hope and faith.

Read and receive these cries, prayers, fears, images, doubts, hopes, desires, and dreams that have been created and shared through acts of vulnerability and faith by members of our community.

In this way, we are able to be Christ to each other. In this way we empower each other and ourselves to defiantly continuing creating, even in the face of despair. In this way we live into our identities as *imago dei*, images of the ultimate artist, our Creator.

Rebecca Blake & Les Hilliard

Table of Contents

Noah Carlson <i>Philadelphia</i>	6
Katie Mulligan <i>Sermon Hosea 1:2-4</i>	7-8
Ben Robinson <i>Wailing Wall</i>	9
Adam Bowers <i>Excerpt from Tides and the Moon</i>	10-13
Jordan Burdge <i>The Most Dangerous Thoughts</i>	13
Brian Russo <i>Excerpt from Crows in the Wheatfield Part I</i>	14
Ben Robinson <i>Untitled</i>	15
Brian Russo <i>Excerpt from Crows in the Wheatfield Part II</i>	16-17
Israel Durham <i>Excerpt from In Groan</i>	18
Clayton Mauritzen <i>Patience</i>	19
Liam O'Donnell <i>Creed</i>	20-21
Les Hilliard <i>Uncle Lawrence</i>	22
Kate Elliott <i>Blown</i>	23
Sarah Bogue <i>Tamar</i>	24
Rebecca Blake <i>Release</i>	25
B. Erin Buckner <i>Haiku #15</i>	26
Clayton Mauritzen <i>A Child of the Promise</i>	27-32
Ben Robinson <i>Nighttime in the Selkirk Mountains</i>	33
Edwin Estevez <i>Is there anything lonelier than the night without you?</i>	34-35
Nathan Besteman <i>Wondering Eyes</i>	36
Edwin Estevez <i>We Need a New Anthem</i>	37-38
Amy Root <i>Redemption</i>	39
Regina Langley <i>The Music is the Magic</i>	40-41
Jordan Burdge <i>Love was Lost, and a Good Thing, Too</i>	42
Liam O'Donnell <i>Missed Connections</i>	43-44
Kelly Roman <i>Glow in the Wilderness</i>	45
Rebecca Blake <i>Lost and Found</i>	46-47

Philadelphia

A rally for sorrow bellows
As two beauties in swivel chairs
Pirouette along the avenue
Where graffiti-ed newspaper boxes stand sentry
And steel-strewn structures scrape the sky
I hate the city I love the city
Meadows of grace and fences of rust
Cordon off where empty shoes hang on wires
And fallen sparrows rise from the ash
A rally of sorrow bellows
From empty warehouse smokestacks that
Stretch into the blue wallpaper cracks of the sky
And suffer in the lonely blues of a street saxophonist
Urchin to pin-stripes, poet of concrete
Melodies that surrender artistic fanfare for
A rally of sorrow
And now the taxis join
Their cantankerous caravan picking up fares with no destination
And tears fall down their yellow-checked sides
And the bells of a trolley hark their
Siren's song back to childhood
And all of this is nothing more
Than intrepid blades of grass
Shooting through concrete slabs
In a rally for sorrow.

Noah Carlson

“So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim...”

(Or The Story of How Gomer Came to Agree to Be Hosea’s Wife)

Loosely based on the missing pieces in Hosea 1:2-4

He watched her for days. He watched her as she walked the streets with a light step, laughing most nights at the men who came to her. He watched her afterwards at the end of the night, weary and worn, her step dragging now as she sought her bed finally alone. He wondered if there was another way to fulfill the Lord’s command, for this woman filled him with distaste. There were certain moments when she moved--shimmered really--and he could not remove his eyes. And the Lord whispered in Hosea’s ear, “Yes, exactly this one. That is the sense of it. You cannot look away, can you?” And Hosea trembled, for this was a thing without pity. He hated that the Lord came to him as a woman’s voice. It was improper, indecent, and he would tell no one that part.

She watched him watch her for days. He was one of many, but he was always there lately. Some of them were like that—watching first, finding the courage to ask for what they wanted. Gomer wasn’t sure she would agree to this one; he was too serious, too grim. Still, if he offered bread...well, she was always hungry.

The night was ending and her body ached. Too many this night, too many. Tears welled in her eyes as she wondered how many more she would take before she died. There seemed no other future, and some day one of these men would kill her—maybe this man who watched her so intently. She dropped a coin as she walked near him and crouched low to retrieve it.

As she squatted the voice came to her again, sweet and soft like it always did.

“This one, child, this is the one.”

“This one what?” snapped Gomer. She was not fond of the voice. “And who are you, anyway? It worries me that I can hear you.”

The voice laughed, tinkling in the air. “I am who I am . And you should be worried. You will bear a child soon.”

The voice was always right, and Gomer grieved. A child—perhaps this is what would kill her.

“Then it will die,” she said flatly. There was no pity left in her for a baby—she could barely feed herself. Would it starve to death or would she kill it for mercy?

“Hush, child. You must take this man for your own. He will father your children and keep you in bread.” Gomer stood and laughed deeply, her head thrown back. Her body and hair shimmered. The man caught his breath.

“Why?” she demanded. “Why would this man take me as wife? Why would any man take me as wife?”

The voice did not answer right away. “He will be your salvation. He will deliver you. And you will be his completion.”

“Well, I will certainly be the end of him!” Gomer was doubled over laughing now. The voice grew impatient.

“He will take you because I told him to.” The voice was stubborn, intractable. Gomer stopped laughing and considered the proposition. It would mean food and shelter—the baby might not die.

"So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim..."

"Who is he?" Gomer asked.

"Always with the questions, child! He is Hosea, my prophet to Israel. He needs to learn of love, so I send you to him."

Gomer laughed again. "I shall be your prophet to Hosea, then!" The voice did not reply, and Gomer turned toward the man. Suddenly weary of the game they played, Gomer put her hands out toward him and half closed her eyes. She called out to him:

I am a rose of Sharon,

a lily of the valleys.

As a lily among brambles,

so is my love among maidens.

The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.

Look, there he stands behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.

Hosea stepped back in horror. Such beautiful words fell from the lips of this woman, making a mockery of all that he knew to be right. Still, the Lord had said it was this one.

"Come with me and I will give you a home," he said. "And your children too. But they shall not be mine." Hosea's jaw clenched at the thought.

Gomer smiled broadly. "Then we shall call this one Jezreel, for God will sow the seed." The laughter bubbled in her throat and she twirled in the street.

Hosea held his body stiffly, but he offered his hand. "Come, the night is done and it is time for us to sleep."

Despite her amusement Gomer hesitated. Might she not rather die than live with this man? But the voice prodded her, "Take this hand offered to you, child. Take this hand and live." So she fit her hand into his and looked him in the eye to say sweetly, "Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine."

He shuddered and dropped her hand. He walked some distance ahead of her, but waited for her to follow.

Katie Mulligan



Wailing Wall
Ben Robinson

an excerpt from

Tides and the Moon

The boy's mother sat in the idling SUV, fuming. The exhaust rising from the tailpipe and dissipating ethereally was a visual reminder of the time she was wasting waiting for her son. They had carpooled this year, as gas prices rose and her patience with him diminished. She did not know what he did that took so long, but she could not help thinking it was done intentionally to spite her. Gripping the wheel, seat belt pre-emptively fastened, she stared into the woods the car faced behind their house as if to penetrate their depths.

As she sat waiting, her mind wandered and pondered the great conundrums of her life—a life that she never seemed to will or create but was always only thrust upon her, like some dressing room attendant at her least favorite clothing store, weighed down by a pile of ill-fitting garments that no one else wanted. From this, she thought, she was expected to create a meaningful whole, a patchwork of ratty scraps into an outfit of elegance. She impulsively looked at the clock on the car's dash. What could he possibly be doing? She tried to imagine his various routines and unnecessary crimping a boy of any age should not bother with. She became hot sitting there, her coat fully zipped, the car steaming in accordance with her sentiments. The engine's sound changed for a moment, like a person shifting in their seat, and then regained the fretful whirring with which she so identified.

As more minutes ticked by and her own potential tardiness came further into focus, she sat there and began to boil in the heat of her coat and her coffee and the car's humid tropical exhalations, and she felt a surging of her typical unbridled rage swelling up and outward, compressing the roof and windows and suffocating the air itself with its fury. She perceived it but could not temper it, it was as the tide, manipulated by the moon and the circumambulation of heavenly bodies, she was swept away, could only occasionally find something sturdy to hang onto but now resolutely was pulled below the surface by the rip tide of her anger and fear and so descended into the gloomy uncharted ruminations of so much bitter drowning despair.

And it just isn't fair, it doesn't make sense . we give people handouts . why can't he get out of bed . it's as if he was the most ungrateful child on the planet . though I was . . . I knocked on his door and heard his alarm going off and tried to see if a light was on and called to him softly at first and then when only a grunt came in response louder I told him it was time to get up . he lays there . he does not have a job . he does not go to school . I don't know what to do . he is my child .

No one respects me here . I am a maid service . I scrub your toilets and dishes and wash several loads of laundry a week and all for what . what do I get . who cares what I do .

And you husband . if I had the lung capacity of a thousand Olympic swimmers I could not gather enough breath to push out the rage I feel for you . we are one flesh but I would cut you off . we are inseparable but I would cast you to wolves .

Son I don't know why your grandfather died . he was a good man . murderers rapists terrorists reach old age . hobble around on canes and walkers . yet he who helped so many touched so many lives . he was eaten from the inside out . while prisoners are fed three square meals with my tax dollars it's ridiculous.

You want to know why I am the way I am why nothing goes right why the cloud of negativity constantly colors my world ask God I don't know I marked my baby's foot with permanent marker in the nursery so he would not be switched out for another this is the sort of fate I face to be daily confronted with the knowledge that God and fate and the gods have convened the council regarding my life and have spoken with the authority that any appeal brought against it would die mid-speech like a bird swooping into a glass window that assumed its transparency was permeable

Their verdict was clear I was to suffer I was to be dealt misfortune small and large I was meant to suffer the self they spoke without a stutter my family will be turned against me they will scorn my nagging they will loathe me I will serve them but they will die with unresolved self-hatred which I have taught them The council of Gods and fate have set enmity between myself and them, they will exile me from their hearts I will scrub their dishes throw soiled underwear in the wash caress toilet bowls with bleach and sponges but their hearts will be far from me

I who bore them in me wretched spewing mornings ballooned lurching to work to support their unborn greed already manifesting itself as they take and take and only give me their urine and feces

This is the life the council decided for me to be forever reaching down to pick up and clean to be reaching out with open palms seeking acceptance but only to be slapped away forever raising angry waspish fists to the heavens the council's meeting place to curse the day of my birth and all birth to call down a new flood of some more efficient destruction and so wipe out the hemming and hawing of the mercilessness of the council's decision always teased by hope for an instant but swiftly reminded of the one unalterable law of my universe and experience – it will go wrong it doesn't matter what it is it will fail will die will expire be consumed go awry sour leak drip dropped broken mistaken taken strained stressed betrayed

When we moved I took your brother's life with me it was no longer his the illusion was broken we moved because I wanted make no mistake it was for you and yet primarily me For I have removed fate from the center of my decision making told him get packing there may be someone else down the street or across the tracks interested in your guidance despotic though it is but fate will no longer rule me I am my own master I move us at will I put axes to the roots of your life and uproot you this is not a democracy but not a tyranny either I am not arbitrary I am always and simply pro me This is consistent you must learn this or be crushed by it

Not that you asked but I will tell you what's wrong with him I know what it is to be frustrated what's wrong with him do you know? I think it was a girl I think it was some little bitch who broke him I want to break her where is she? I'll tell you what's wrong with him money is meaningless gratitude and comfort meaningless it is the neurotic air he breathes he is comfortable who am I to discomfort him?

I think it's his friends that one weasel he calls his friend he leads him astray they smoke I know it I'm glad he has friends here but not glad for the friends he has – he thinks he can be out as late as he wants on a school night what is he thinking is he thinking?

I've tried to love him right worked at the hospital for him slept only a wink each night for him when he was a sickly infant I've put my insides through a meat grinder for him

worrying about him and where am I now where I wasn't when I was a child or first married or dead?

This is my fate to forever reach out in love and be spited for it to reach in longing but be decimated This is my lot though I can't recall casting it This is my world though I never dreamed of it He is my death though I never conceived of it

When my second son came along though I was very suspect I had no choice but to love him His being was a command I can't understand young mothers who throw their babies in dumpsters It's easier to blow your own brains out than to leave your child to exposure But I guess they should never have been mothers in the first place never had the mother love in them

I always had it but it was a dangerous love It did not sleep in sentimental rose petals or lie on downy soft silk pillows It was love on a razor's edge balanced there but always threatening to slip and be sliced in pieces It was never a quiet love but two cymbals crashed just outside your ear sort of love I had no choice their child eyes saw through me to the love and since I could no longer hide it I would give it room to stretch

I felt this at the hospital poking babies so small they fit in my palm in their novelty-sized tiny fingers to draw blood I saw them in their plastic bubble worlds –for some it became their fish-bowl coffins – with glazed unseeing eyes that blinked occasionally to clear the film but then kept their lids shut their subterranean primal urge to live superseding their thoughtless desire to see and begin to process their fluorescent light refracted bubble world I saw them squirm in protest against their creator whether God or fate or hapless procreators kicking at the air with arrested motion trying to move pudgy arms with unyielding muscles all the while infused with such an array of tubes and cords that one had to wonder about their true humanity

And the mothers who came in to see their ailing issue could only rarely extract them from their sterilized misery and allow them to feel the warmth of the mother blood still being poured out though no longer directly but in private their milk flooding the once arid rivulets of their breasts overflowing the banks because the infant who should alleviate the thick pools of liquid desire cannot cannot risk the world outside the bubble

So when they can't hold their baby they stand endlessly pressed against the glass like a child pressed against a pet store window seeing the puppy she would in her childish naivety sacrifice anything to have They stare at us enraged as we go about our work jealous beyond what's bearable that their struggle personified could be cared for by any other mother Sometimes their palms are placed delicately upon the smooth clear barrier to their baby's life sometimes greasy foreheads rest there so that by the end of the day before maintenance slumps by and cleans the slate of their lament the oily imprint of so much longing irritates me the glass pock marked with their despair as if they alone knew what it was to suffer I can't say they are right but they're not wrong either Come between a mother bear and her cubs and she will eviscerate you with relish This is the problem with motherhood – it consumes your spirit as the fetus once did your flesh

If this is my fate to crawl in the dust of our history to be dragged by my hair like some cavewoman through the annals of your self discovery I banish myself I withdraw my name from the running you can have yourself but you can't have me I will no longer be your frontier the swollen walls of my womb shall burst for you if you leave I will implode

you need me as rivers need rain the world will devour you I could keep you safe and warm I could keep you

Finally he emerged from the garage, coatless and wearing ratty slippers that he had made a habit of wearing in public. Seeing him broke the spell of her wrenching reverie, looking as disheveled as he was the day he first breathed true air. He seemed to be sleepwalking, listing like a maldistributed cargo ship, his blue hoodie and sunglasses enfolding him like a gossamer shawl, not fooling anyone how naked he really was, how susceptible to the January freezing. He tripped briefly as his slipper's sole caught a crack in the driveway. Washed as she was by the tide of her loss, like a stone or piece of glass worn smooth by the gentle swishing of millennia, she was beached by his appearance, could no longer, for the moment, be swept up, but sat there determinedly calm, gripping the wheel slightly less tightly, and attempted a smile as he reached for the door.

Adam Bowers



The Most Dangerous Thoughts

The most dangerous thoughts
are the ones I think you're thinking.
I take them out at night like a set of false teeth
and put them on my table
next to my watch.
In the morning they are rotten.

Jordan Burdge

excerpts from

Crows in the Wheatfield

Part I

It's strange. We were together for seven years, yet it seems like you never even existed. So much time has passed that I can hardly discover the balance between what was factual and what has become fictional; that which was really you and that which has become tainted by a memory disavowed of reality. There are times that I find myself convinced that you were just a figment of my elaborate imagination, a self-imposed trick of the mind to paper up the cracks of my pitiful existence.

But that too is only smoke and mirrors, a denial mechanism, for I know that you were real. Yes, even if my memory now speaks to me in a form of mathematics I can barely understand, I remember you. I remember our walks in the park. I remember holding your hand on a train ride home. In a slow shutter speed, I can remember how your hair would shift from left to right as the autumn wind changed its bearing. I remember its highlights in the summer sun and its enchanting smell as spring encroached out of winter's tight grip. But most of all, I remember the way you used to look at me...

You see, there I go again, falling under your spell. You disgust me. As you've always done, you spark flames just to extinguish them. This is how I know you are real. You're all too powerful not to be.

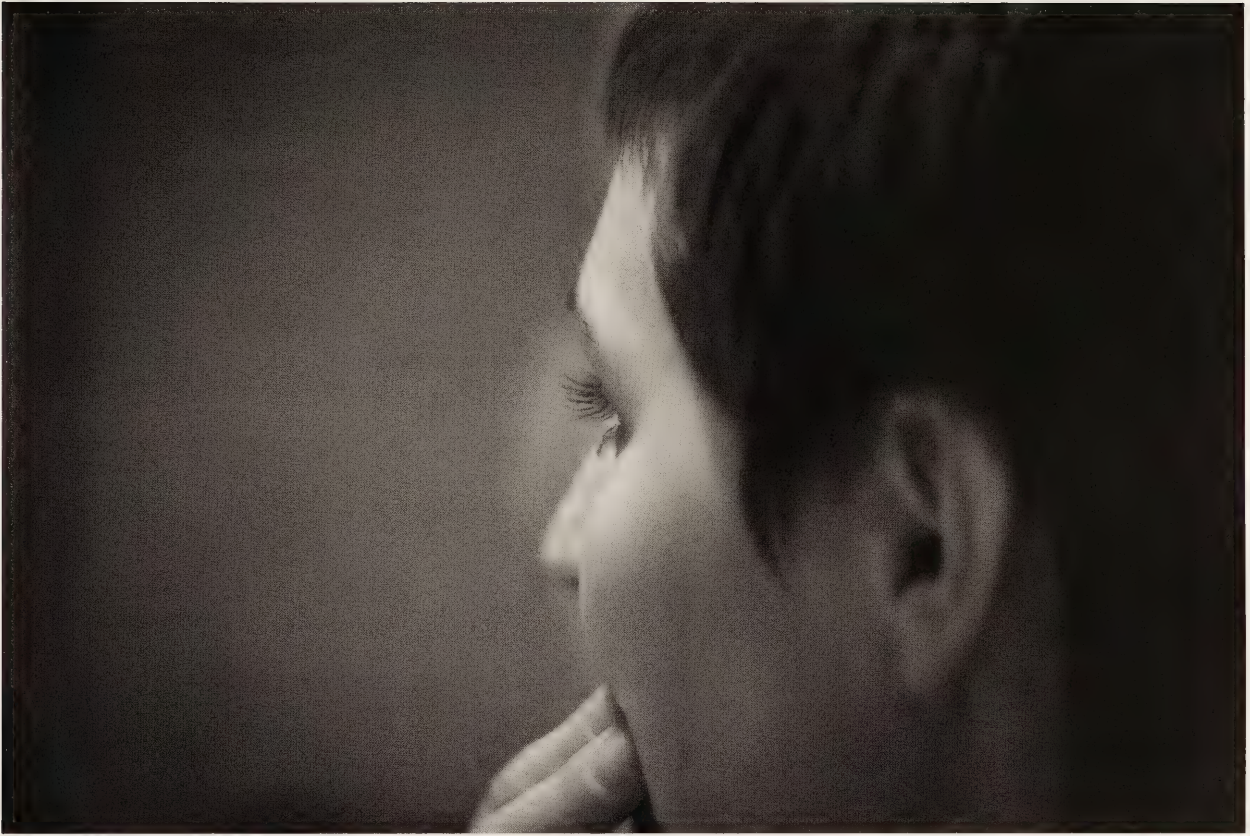
Do you know that I see you still? No, not actually you, I haven't seen you in years. But, I see your face on others. You've been the stranger on the bus, the passerby on the street, the woman in the produce section. Portraits are always deceiving. For a moment I'm sure it's you and I get utterly terrified, unable to move as a temporary paralysis grounds me to the earth. But then relief sets in when her nose is too big, or her mouth too wide, her hair too auburn. You're a curse nonetheless. I can't leave my house without you infiltrating my mind. Seven years have passed and still you assail me. People like to say that time is the omnipotent healer, but I've proven over and over again there can be anomalies.

Yes, I can tell what you what must have thought me to do, and indeed, I subjected myself to the torment of psychological "help". But they don't have the remedy. No one can help me, and apparently, least of which you. All I needed was a sincere apology. A letter. Perhaps that would have given me closure. But that was too much for you. You simply vanished like an artist in exile. Even though I forgave you and reopened my bed to you, you still left, disappearing within a world you knew I'd never find. Like magnetized videotape, an entire window of your past was boarded up, as if nothing between us had ever been encrypted to memory. I've always marveled at that. How you could so easily move on, seamlessly neglecting that the last years of your life had ever happened.

So as I witness my end, I want you to know that I hold you solely accountable. As soon as you left, my life spiraled out of control into the darkest of hallows. Any prior existence of luck or good fortune evaporated, and the devil refused to return either. It is my only hope, my last hope in fact, that you inherit the same fate when I die tomorrow.

Goodbye, my anathema, may karma only serve you confusion and pain.

Brian Russo



Ben Robinson

excerpts from

Crows in the Wheatfield

Part II

February 3, 1997

James, I hope you didn't think it was easy. There was nothing easy about it. To own the truth, it was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But, I had to. I couldn't stay. Not then at least. Waking up every morning, opening my eyes to the lie I was living was too powerful to bear. ...I never cheated, that too was a lie. I convinced myself that you would throw me out and that would be my excuse for starting over, somewhere else. But you didn't. You loved me too much, perhaps even to your death. I know my place is in Hell for such a thing. To make up such a lie, to hurt you so terribly, to simply disappear after you forgave me unwarrantedly for an action uncommitted... I can hardly look at myself in the mirror. When I do, beyond the wrinkles and thinning hair, all I ever see is that young, ignorant woman who made the mistake that would follow her around for the rest of her life. I know. It's the greatest of clichés. But truly, there's not a day that goes by when I'm not reminded of it.

When I was younger, it was easier to cope with. I made a new life for myself, built on the momentum of entering a world filled with novel ambition and re-born possibility. I stayed with the art, was privately commissioned, and made decent money. Over the last couple of years, some of my work has made it overseas, while others now hang in the SFMoMA. I wonder if you'd be proud or if you'd simply be disgusted. My final work was dedicated to you... "How To Reverse Time."

Have you noticed that I write like you now? Since the funeral it's been impossible to tell where you end and I begin. Indeed, you would have found it ironic if the situation were someone else's, that is, your death and my re-birth. Can you see the curse that is upon me, James? We've become a unified organism again, but you're no longer here. No second chances, no allowances to redeem myself, no opportunities to erase the pain that I caused you. If only I could actually do what my art portrays. If only I could reverse time. I'd give anything to go back and reconcile, to work as hard on us as I did with my art. I've seen much and experienced more, yet nothing has ever paralleled those first years with you.

But surely you ask, if all of this is true, why did I wait until now to say it? As I said before, I am weak. Like an artist of old, I exiled myself and hid from a life I was too scared to re-enter. But now that I have, the moment has passed, and the only thing I've gained from it all has been that curse. You haunt me now more than ever. Every night brings with it nightmares of your voice. I wake up in a sweat when I remember the way you used to look at me. I can scarcely make it out of the house without seeing your face on others: the stranger on the train, the observer in the museum, the lonely man at the market.

I would have sacrificed everything to lift this curse, just to have seen the real you again. I would have burned every portrait, every landscape, and every abstraction, just so I could have talked with you, to tell you how sorry I was. It was my eternal hope that you would have somehow forgiven me if allowed a third chance.

Do you know what fuels this hope, a fool's hope, no less? It is the image of that letter, the one you were buried with. Your hands were folded across your chest, clutching it to your heart. All I could make out was the date, February 3, 1997. Why would you have chosen that date; what would have otherwise been our 14th anniversary, James?

What did you want to tell me? Did you want me to reach for it? The lid was closed before I could.

And so I remain blind, blind to your orbit and the veracity of your final words. Like a senile astronomer, I endlessly graph incoherent constellations throughout dueling phases of sun and moon. I throw assumptions into the sky only to have gravity throw them right back. Did you love me, or did you hate me? I have been so internally plagued by this question that it's now risen to my skin, a leper's memento to ensure that I will never escape it.

You see, to be so devoured by confusion, to never know for certain if you gave me a phantom to follow or a truth to embrace, it is simply too much to endure any longer.

So as I see the crows now flying toward me, I know I've made the only choice that I had left.

I will find you in the next life.

Brian Russo

an excerpt from

In Groan

Someone told me that when her loved one died, in the final moments of her life, the woman was embraced by her daughter. And when she took her final breath and entered the unknown known, the eerily unspeakable happened: the woman's body made a noise. It was not the woman; it was her body. I tried to understand what it must have sounded like but it was difficult for her to articulate. But I imagined it was a groan. The kind of groan that for as many years as you have lived fully captivated the vicissitudes of your life—when you were born and the innocence of the pain you inflicted; when you had your first birthday cake and smeared it on your father's face, only to have him laugh and sing Happy Birthday in the loudest voice possible; when you fell and scraped your knee on the gravel playground at school and it left a permanent black mark on the indent of your knee cap; when you had that genesis quivering in your unseen parts; when you got married to the rib of your completion; when you loved someone so much that you had never even known or met, but were chosen as the conduit for her arrival; when you rued marrying your spouse because he no longer looked at you in the same way he did years prior, and you never told him; when your lover's soul was the only thing left for you to hold on to and in spite of the waning love, you could not have been with anyone else; when the rib of your completion withered away to nothing more than an eventual feast for the Earth; when the emptiness of the bed's indentation to your left was not big enough, deep enough, to hold your crippled heart.

Israel Durham



Patience
Clayton Mauritzen

Creed

These hallowed walls hide killers, you know?

They wear looks that say love and joy

But they want you dead

it's in their smiles

they flash them like knives and death glints off their pearly whites

they say love but they spit hate

it shoots through those smiles

past teeth that are jagged and sharp

they sharpen those teeth on the bones of those whom they consume

they eat them you know, the different ones

they consume them all over, but especially here, behind stained glass, under those ringing bells, they eat them up like they ain't never ate before

they eat all these others

the ones who look different, think different, live different, dream different, pray different, LOVE different

oh, those? Those they especially hunger for.

they say love has rules, has regulations, has limits, and you have to follow them or your love is wrong, you are loving wrong

and they eat you up

they have dead eyes you know

do you see it?

it is just a hint but it is there haunting their vision like a mournful ghost

moaning past their hypocritical words, their words dripping with sanctimony and conviction,

moaning to tell you the truth

the specter of those eyes says

they eat them all here. eat them to fill the hole they have. eat them from the feet up, they start with the young but they got a long time to eat you, it takes a lifetime but by the end, trust me, they will pass you like refuse

don't you fear that specter, love, when you see it haunting their eyes

like death haunts their doctrines, like hate stinks up their love feast

don't you worry when you hear the rattle of bones in their songs and the knives hidden under their robes

tip your hat and thank the ONE WHO CALLS that you saw it before you became their depravity

run then, run to a place of laughter, and peace, and loving, run to people who dance with the ONE WHO CALLS who dance each other into ecstatic joy, who proclaim that there is enough for us to love and love and love and we needn't eat each other anymore, we needn't destroy each other here because we are only full as the other is full, as you are full, as you are loved so I am loved, and so we love

run to that place child
run from these whitewashed tombs, these bloodstained chapels
if you stay they will eat you and leave you behind and thank the man they call god that they
did it
then you will be one of them, walking refuse, feasting on the living. Amen.

Liam O'Donnell

Uncle Lawrence

my uncle just died.

he was a wealthy business man and cattle farm owner from a forgotten, speckle of dust town rolling around somewhere in southern texas. he freely released his money and always wore ten gallon hats tipped too far back and nice business suits in shades of blue and gray.

after i heard of his death, i sprawled on my bed, contemplating how to properly react to a death, and the only things that fluttered through my mind were scattered, peculiar memories of places and people peripheral to him.

i remember my uncle's 7 ft. deep swimming pool, complete with one of those rigid, stone tablet diving boards that just end up stinging your feet. i remember my father's minuscule, flesh-colored swimming trunks that somehow made his jet-black hair and mustache even darker. he had a dive: that one, rare dive that he would only unleash to a select, privileged few save but one or two times each year. he would stand steadily facing away from the pool and carefully clench the cliff of the diving board with his curled toes. his body would settle into a solid silence (i think for dramatic effect) and suddenly spring high into the summer air, pausing at the pinnacle of the arch, and then, giving a nod to gravity to resume her work, would descend lightly back to earth, slowly making an incision in the water's surface with his hands and slipping his body into the wound before it could cauterize.

my uncle also had a chain-link cage on his property containing a whole litter of puppies. i don't remember why he had them. i was playing inside my uncle's house with my brother when we heard a fit of yelling and barking outside. before our curiosity steeped to action, my mother buzzed into our room in an anxious frenzy and told us to stay put. she stood blocking the door, rocking back and forth while her eyes quivered about the ceiling. an exciting, arresting quiet followed. the front door slammed with a hollow echo and was followed by some heavy footsteps. straggling to my feet, i inched my way to the wall and suctioned my ear to it. my aunt's sing-song voice wafted undecipherable against the opposite side of the wall. my uncle gurgled some phlegm and said, "yeah, i got 'em."

i'm not entirely sure why i'm writing all this. my guess is i don't really know what to do or how to react. that really stands out to me. all i could think of was telling some stories. telling some of his stories is the only way i feel i can honor his life in all the cluttered, wondrous mystery of it. it just refuses to be summarized by some one word pleasantries.

i miss you already uncle lawrence. thank you for giving all of us stories. i am praying for your family. i'm sorry you went through so much pain and struggle, but i know you are peaceful now.

oh, by the way, it was a coyote.

Les Hilliard



Blown
Kate Elliott

an excerpt from

Tamar

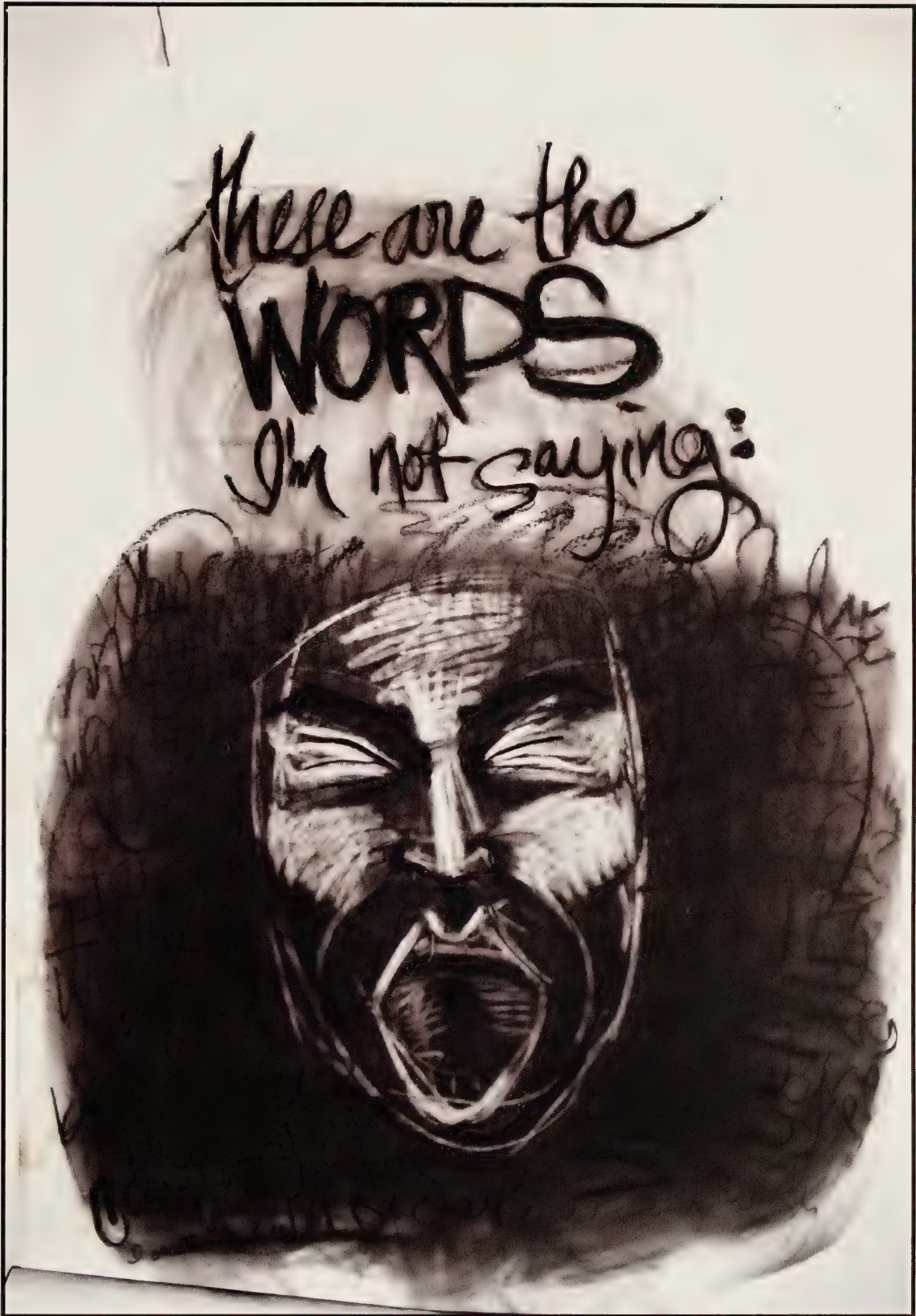
And the men in her life, how do they respond? David, king David, God's anointed, also happens to be Tamar's father. As her father, he had a responsibility to Tamar, to punish her rapist and protect her in his home. But we know David's past. His actions are well documented. We, and Amnon, have seen how David killed Uriah in his single-minded pursuit of Bathsheba. We have seen how David repented of that sin when Nathan, the prophet, pointed out his error. But Amnon did not. Instead, Amnon has seen only that his father, an anointed king of Israel, committed an unspeakable crime of sexual assault with impunity. Why should Amnon not be permitted to do exactly the same thing? So, when David hears about Amnon's actions, he has an opportunity to be a father, a king, a man of God. He has an opportunity to address the vicious cycle of abuse that has come to characterize his family. But instead, David "becomes very angry" and still remains silent. He refuses to rebuke or punish Amnon for his actions. Blinded by the love of his firstborn son and paralyzed by his guilt for Bathsheba, David is silent. He too does not hear Tamar's cries.

As for Absalom, at first glance, it might be easy to see him as Tamar's savior. After all, he responds to her, speaks to her, takes her in when no one else will. Later in 2 Samuel we learn that he has even named a daughter after Tamar, giving her, in some way, the child and the future that she can no longer have. Absalom even eventually exacts the revenge that David will not, and orders the brutal killing Amnon. But this murder, this fratricide is the fuel which sparks a civil war between David and Absalom, tearing the country of Israel apart as their family has been torn apart. Instead of listening to Tamar, Absalom simply perpetuates the cycle of abuse, deceit, murder and grief. Absalom, though he tries, cannot hear Tamar over the roaring of his own need to solve and to fix.

Tragically, victims often cannot be heard speaking the truth of their pain. Sometimes the pain is simply too deep, too overwhelming to be expressed in words. In this text, Tamar had potential advocates who might have spoken for her, listened to her. But they did not. Ultimately, there is no theological, scriptural or "Christian" answer to sexual assault. Do not cheapen my mother's pain, my sister's pain, Tamar's pain by patting them on the shoulder, saying "God will heal" or "God will provide." Healing may come, but there are simply no guarantees of wholeness in this lifetime. The pain of victims is real and it does not have an easy answer. Resist the urge to fix! Resist the urge to "solve"! Resist the urge to sweep this complex biblical witness under a theological rug, ignoring questions of theodicy and running for the safer pastures of Christology or polity. Sit with this text, wrestle with it. And more importantly sit with victims, listen to them, weep with them and make the church a safe haven at last.

So where is God in this text? Where was God when Tamar was raped? Where is God when children are molested? Where was God when six million Jews were starved, beaten and murdered in the Holocaust? Where is God when my family is torn, its identity and integrity ripped to pieces? Where is God when I cannot say that it is well with my soul? Where is God? God is weeping. God is weeping for broken bodies, broken souls and broken minds. God is weeping for lost futures and stolen identities. God is weeping, and sometimes that is the only answer we have.

Amen.



Release, 3'x4" charcoal on paper
Rebecca Blake



Haiku #15

bathing ritual
disease tainted River
god observes unmoved

B. Erin Buckner

A Child of the Promise

Last night, I dreamed that I had a cup of coffee with God—which is odd, for me at least, because I don't believe in God. Now, I need to be clear about this point. It's not that I don't believe that God exists.

Most people, in looking for shortcuts through the English language, blur "I don't believe that God exists" into "I don't believe in God"—pure laziness, really. These statements mean fundamentally different things. By equating the two, they're committing the classic fallacy of equivocation. According to Steve Layman—he wrote the logic textbook still resting on my shelf—"equivocation occurs when a word (or phrase) is used with more than one meaning in an argument but the validity of the argument depends on the word's being used with the same meaning throughout." In other words, you can't use two different meanings for the same word in the same argument.

I believe in Michael Phelps. I don't believe in George W. Bush. I'm not saying that Michael Phelps exists, I'm saying that he can swim. I'm picking him in any race any day, bong hit or not. As for Bush, well, I just don't trust him to run the country. I know he exists. I'm not a fool.

This is the inherent problem: the verb "believe" can mean a couple of different things: it can mean to assent to some objective fact about the universe, or it can mean trust or have faith in someone.

So maybe that's my problem with God: it's an issue of faith.

To be honest, the question of whether or not God exists is beyond me. Philosophers far more intelligent than me have been knocking this one around, back and forth, for a long, long time now. And no one's really gotten anywhere either. As far as I'm concerned, it's irrelevant—just doesn't matter much to me. If God doesn't exist, then the joy we find is what we make. If he does, what kind of God is he after all, leaving the world in the shape that it's in?

No—my issue with God is a different one; I just don't trust him to run the universe.

But that's why the dream surprised me: I left God behind me years ago.

I dreamed that I heading down Interstate 30 to the Starbucks off Broadway. This is not my favorite part of the city. Everything is monotonous and prefabricated, as if IKEA built strip malls and not just furniture. But it's busy, and I'm anonymous. I go to that Starbucks nearly every day of the week, and I order the exact same drink, a caffè latte. It's not original, I know, and I'm not particularly original myself, but not once has a single clerk recognized me.

Typical for late-morning Sunday, the place was crowded. I'd brought Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, a project I'd been working on for a few months, and there was only one seat left open. So I took it. I didn't see the person sitting across from me, man or woman—didn't matter much to me.

After about a page and a half, I paused, set the book on the table and drew in a deep breath through my nose. I love the way this coffee shop smells. All the different blends, from all over the world. Body odor from all over the world, with a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg. The place seemed to steam in the sun, light turning the humid morning into nearly-visible vapor. I could hear maybe half a dozen different conversations above Miles Davis, scattin' and growling on a trumpet.

I sat there people-watching for a few minutes. My gaze rose and curled around the room like cigarette smoke. Eventually, it eddied onto the man across the table.

He was staring at me.

"You haven't touched your caffè latte yet."

The man sat across from me statuesque and immobile, his chin high. He had a full, but well-trimmed, beard that blended into his ivory skin, and his hair was cut close, but not too close. He wore a white, button-down shirt with charcoal slacks the color of the sky at midnight. And he didn't stop staring.

"I don't like my coffee so hot. I'm letting it cool."

"Lukewarm."

"Yes," I answered, as if he had asked a question. I picked up the book again, hoping to end the conversation politely, and his marble form remained motionless. So I kept reading: *...systems and theories are constantly blown to the devil. And where did all these sages get the idea that man needs some normal, some virtuous wanting? What made them necessarily imagine that what man needs is necessarily a reasonably profitable wanting? Man needs only independent wanting, whatever this independence may cost and wherever it may lead. Well, and this wanting...*

I could feel his glare on my head, and I was starting to get agitated. His eyes lowered to my own, and I could swear that I felt him reach inside, probing into my ——. Well, I don't know what—just inside.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"Why do you think that I would need any help?"

"I don't know. This is just starting to get—um—. Would you just stop staring at me?"

"Sure." The marble relaxed into flesh as he sat back in the chair, but his gaze stayed fixed. "Excellent book. *The Underground Man* is one of my favorite characters in Russian literature; though of course, no one can hold a candle to Ivan's devil in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky outdid himself—extraordinary!"

"Can I help you?"

"That's the second time you've asked me that, and the answer is the same as before. No. I'm fine. I must admit, it is ironic that you would ask me that question. But, turnabout is fair play."

"I'm sorry. I'm confused."

"I should say so, but then that is nothing new."

I am not one for confrontation, and this was no exception.

"You—you don't know me. Have I done something to offend you? Because look, I'm sorry. Whatever it is, I'm sorry."

"That's also the second time that you have apologized, and you don't even know why you are apologizing."

I looked down at my coffee, and I could feel the blood flushing my face. I looked back up, but not directly at the stranger.

"You know what. I'm going to go. I'll get out of here and leave you to whatever it is you were doing." My voice wobbled, and I swallowed to keep it from going over the edge.

As I stood to leave, the stranger waved his hands together and said,

“No, no. Stay—stay. I offended you, and I am the one who should be apologizing.”

I didn’t say anything, but as I sat back down, he extended his hand across the table. I hesitated, then accepted his gesture. The contours of his eyes softened a little, relaxed even.

“Let me introduce myself,” the stranger said, my hand wrapped in both of his. Now closer, I could see that age had traced fine lines in his chalky flesh. “I am God.”

I snorted, and drew back.

“Excuse me? You are God? I don’t believe this.”

“I am—in the flesh!” He gave me a little flourish with his hands, as if he were a magician. “It’s not a joke. I”—he paused for effect—“am God.”

“Forgive me if I’m skeptical.”

“My son, your sins are forgiven,” he pronounced and made the sign of the cross in the air between us. His smile widened at his own joke, the grin absent-mindedly chewing a stirring straw between pearl-like teeth.

I leaned back into my chair, unsure how to respond. Finally, I asked,

“If you’re God, why are you a white man?”

“Oh, but I am not a man, nor am I white. You only see me this way. I am merely as you imagine me.”

“You look more like Zeus than God,” I returned.

“Ah ha!” His eyes began to twinkle. “The classical representation of my deity in Western aesthetics. I guess some images endure more than others.” The stranger slapped his leg with laughter and hooted, as if he wanted me to know just how funny he found this.

“Well,” I rejoined, digging deep, “I’m not sure that I believe you as I see nothing more in your open mouth than a half-chewed coffee straw.”

“Good one, my dear Arjuna!” I could see that he was enjoying the banter. “But we both know that you haven’t opened the Bhagavad Gita since college, and even then you didn’t get but halfway. Besides, I would hardly call you a devotee of Krishna, much less of anyone. Well, anyone other than Howard Schultz.” He winked at me, and his smirk only widened.

“I don’t know who that is.”

“You don’t? Well, I thought you would. Howard Schultz is the CEO and driving force behind this fine establishment here. You wouldn’t be drinking a caffè latte right now—well, letting it cool right now—were it not for him.” The smirk magnified with the taunt. I could feel something smoldering within me, as if coals long doused suddenly found new flame.

“Fine,” I said. “Suppose you are God. I don’t know that I really care. But shouldn’t you be in church or something right now?”

“Well, there is that whole omnipresent thing. It’s one of my many omnis, you know.”

“Oh, come on. We both know that’s bullshit.”

“Yes, it is. I guess you could say that I felt like visiting another, a different, church today. The Church of St. Mammon, Holy Protector and Patron Saint of the Wealthy, the Moneyed, the Filthy Rich!” His eyes glinted with self-satisfaction.

My anger was giving me confidence I didn't know I had. I deadpanned, "That's not very original. Did you get that from a televangelist or something?" "Now you're just being mean." As he winked, the stranger stiffened. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" I countered with mock compassion.

The man stopped, folded his hands together, and directed his gaze to mine. The impish sheen had dimmed.

"So you don't believe me?"

"No," I said flatly and took a deep drink of my coffee.

"I see." His eyes seemed to enlarge—they were vibrant, searching, furrowed with intensity. I couldn't pull away from them.

"Can I tell you a story?"

My back straightened, and I crossed my arms.

"Fine."

"Some time ago, a father had a playground for his children. It was a beautiful place, planted with flowers and fruit trees, and they spent all their time there. They chased sparrows through the fields and climbed the oak trees, even hanging a swing from one. But the father had one rule for his children: they were not supposed to go near one of the trees. It's fruit was dange——"

"Oh come on. I know this story," I interrupted. "It's the Garden of Eden, Genesis 2 and 3. Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and you throw them out. Why are you telling me this? It's a legend, a fable—a morality tale for children."

"It's truer than you know."

"How so? Are you still worried what your children will do with a little knowledge?" I stabbed the table with my index finger. "Do you prefer keeping us ignorant and slaves to our faith in you?"

"Look, that's not how it happened." God's once pale face was florid. "I would have let them eat the fruit when they were ready. They were just children—my children—and in an instant they saw themselves without me, without each other. They became independent but alone, before they knew me. Before even they knew themselves. They were lost in their own knowledge."

"So you turned them out? You kicked them out of their home? What kind of vindictive father would do that?" I was almost spitting the words. God's voiced escalated in response to mine.

"It wouldn't have mattered if they stayed or left. They would have destroyed the garden if I didn't send them out. Just look at what you've done to the world so far. But I stayed with them. They were my children. They may have been prodigals, but they were still my children."

"Father knows best."

"You think I don't know what I am doing? You think you know better than I do?"

I snorted.

"No, I don't. But I'm not an all-knowing, all-powerful deity. If you're God, then I guess I'm just not that impressed."

“And you? You come here day after day, week after week, knowing—hoping—that you won’t be recognized. That’s why you moved to the suburbs. You wanted to be lost, alone in the wilderness where no one could find you, no one could know you.”

My nostrils flared in and out in sharp breaths. Otherwise, I sat immobile.

“But you’re not lost, you know yourself. You’re lonely, and too scared to reach out to someone else. That’s why you spend your nights in front of a computer screen, flashing through porn just so you can feel something. Just so you can imagine for just a moment that you’re not completely alone. That’s why you cling to your independence like it’s some sacred totem.” His voiced raised higher and ran faster. He was nearly shouting now: “You are a Man, you tell yourself. A rock! You may be away from home, but you know where you are. You’re not lost. You know who you are, and so do I.”

I felt my eyes harden, fired in the kiln of anger. My gaze emptied.

“I am not a child. And you are not—and you will never be—my father.”

The words reverberated through him. It was as if the echo fractured his anger and it collapsed within him. The façade slid away in a violent shudder. When the tremors ceased, God slumped before me a smaller, ruined man. His marble face was chipped and weathered, cracks lining it like wrinkles from a thousand years of worry and fear.

“I,” his voice wavered, the overconfidence now spent. He spoke slowly now: “I let you go. It was wrong—I know. I haven’t been a good Father to you these last years. But what can I say? You were the good kid: always there, always happy, always believing. I guess I believed—hoped, really—that you would stay a child forever. When you grew up, our relationship changed. It had to change, you know.” He pulled out a half-empty carton of menthol cigarettes, and, hands trembling, shook one out. He lit it, and took a deep drag, eyes closed.

“You can’t smoke in here.”

He dismissed my comment with his hand.

“Don’t worry. No one else will notice.” After another pull of nicotine, he continued. “Here’s the thing: Jesus was right when he said that you can’t enter the kingdom of heaven without becoming like a child. You know children. They have this way about them—they’re unpainted canvases. If anything, just the outlines of their lives are penciled in, ready to be erased or painted over at any moment. Children are all possibility. No matter who they are, no matter where they are, nothing is written yet. Maybe the pattern stays the same for most, or even nearly all, but *at that moment* they are pure—completely innocent. But when Jesus said that you have to enter the kingdom of heaven like a child, he didn’t mean that once you got in you wouldn’t grow up.”

His eyes were spider-webbed with red, and their luster was not that of marble but of ivy leaves after a spring rain. He paused, mouth to the back of his hand, cigarette smoke curling his head like a halo.

“Part of growing up is recognizing the cracks in the kingdom. It’s not perfect—not yet. I guess I didn’t want you to lose that child-like wonder and ignorance. I didn’t want you to see my plan struggling to survive. I wanted to enjoy your absolute, complete, unquestioned love. I always wanted to be your idol. But the truth is that it wasn’t love between us yet, only affection. Affection can become love, and it often does. But love only

grows through freedom, and children are not free, not really.

In a way, I wanted to be your tyrant forever. I wanted to hold you in the chains of your affection. I thought you were mine, and so I neglected you, enjoying the moments, fewer and fewer, that we spent together. Then before I knew it, you were standing there, but not around my knees, wide-eyed and smiling. No. You were looking me in the eye—furious—and for good reason, if I remember correctly.

Truthfully, I wasn't ready for it. I knew in that moment that, while I was elsewhere and leaving you to do my work, you had grown up without me. Oh, I remember giving you some platitude, a catchy phrase that really didn't mean anything, at least not to a child with an absentee father. I was angry, hurt that the child I loved so much had not grown up to love me. So I let you go. No party, no fanfare, not even some furious pronouncement of judgment. I was speechless in my anger. I guess, in that way we wounded each other—you out of a desperate desire to know good, and thus evil, and me refusing to see you as anything but that child." His twitching finger managed to extract another cigarette.

"I know it's no consolation for the past, but I wanted to come after you, to find you. I don't have a fattened calf like in the old days, but at least let me buy you coffee sometime. If you want, I'll be here tomorrow, the day after that, and the day after that even. I'll wait, I'll be here if you want to chew the fat about anything. We don't have to talk about religion or politics or even me. Weather, the Cowboys, you decide. I don't care. I'll be here every day for a year if that's what it takes." He took my hand into his own. His flesh was warm and moist, and he looked at me, eye to eye.

"I couldn't love myself if I didn't love you. You're all grown up now, and, and it's your decision. I won't force your hand, I promise."

I withdrew my hand, and we sat there in silence for a minute, or two, or maybe more. God went on chain-smoking menthols with a screwy, nervous smile wrinkled into his face. I sat in my chair, staring at nothing, motionless to reign in the churning waves within. When the silence ended, I tried to find words, but none came. Our gaze met—his eyes begging, pleading with me to say something—, and I stood, book in hand, and turned aside to leave. In the reflection of the window, I saw God extinguish a still-smoking butt in my half empty, now completely lukewarm caffè latte.

Some time in the seconds after stepping out into the humid day, I woke up. My armpits and my back were wet, my sheets cold from sweat. Still, I lay there, shaken by my dream and caught up in the overlapping of night and day.

Usually, I wake up confused by the world of my imagination, and as reality sinks in, I forget the night's theater. But this dream stuck with me. It was as if it were less a dream than a vision. It was uncharacteristically clear and sharp. Its story worked in the world beyond its own. As I felt my terror fade, I noticed that the alarm clock read 11:32. It was Sunday morning.

Clayton Mauritzen



Nighttime in the Selkirk Mountains
Ben Robinson

Is there anything lonelier than the night without you?

Go and hunt for warm arms, little girl...
In the night cry because he left
There in the corner, Love made
A harlot, its carriage splashed
The rain all over the
New country dress of summer
It's cold, in the night
Sullied with the stains of
Mud and wet with the side street
Sewage. Who will assuage your solitude?
At the well, thirsting still for
Him, hoping
Still for a cottage in
Bucolic outskirts of the City.
But five you have had and the one
You now have isn't yours.
He's like the others, little girl...
A hostel blanket in the night,
Lie to yourself, deceit
Hidden by his arms, by the sheets of
Cover, the cape of a summer's night.
You are not alone for tonight, but
There is tomorrow—

In the streets probing for blood,
Whoever it is that stares or glances,
Sleep in a rut or a cove or
Under a torn bridge
Because you're alone.
You forget about
Him.
Try to sleep, but slumber is
As cold as a night just after the
Snowfall, as empty as the valley of
Dry bones, as frightening as the
Howls of drowning swine.
Put on dancing shoes,
All worn, evade the King's notice.

In the streets you lurk;
Gaze up at the moon, the
Only light you see in your world.
Bow your head

Before the scorn of trees,
The spurn of the stars,
The moon's disdain as
You tread a path of demise.
Comfort.
Security.
You find it in all of them.
He hands you a few coins, the
Your country dress of summer,
Wet and soiled lies on the cold,
Hard floor. The eyes never
Meet. A diversion in silence;
In tears and in sorrow,
In twinge and in delight,
In stillness and in torment,
In hope and in knowledge,
All caped with the night.
The stars shudder,
The moon grimaces,
The trees bend to mourn like
Weeping willows, their tears
Fall on the rooftops,
They fall from the heavens,
The sigh from the very
Spirit within.
It passes then,
Just as it begun.
Try to rest, little girl...
In the arms of another,
Away from the hell you call home.
And for tonight, you are not alone,
But there is tomorrow--

Edwin Estevez

Wondering Eyes

Long I might walk on this earth,
Long I may be around.
But my thoughts do not concern this,
Rather I look broken at the ground.
The baby girl giggling in loving arms,
the smart boy walking home from school,
I have shattered their dreams,
For I wanted my nation to rule.
Their eyes open no longer,
Their hearts beat no more in their chests.
For I needed to be 'strong' then,
It should have been me laid to rest.
Now my eyes dwindle, down, to the floor,
Surrounded by the eyes of others, thousands more.
Each asks me a simple question,
I cannot even cry.
For their question will remain with me long,
It is only the word, "Why?"

Nathan Besteman

We Need a New Anthem

We need a new anthem
That we can all sing,
We can all sing
Sing along
The same tune, different notes
And different chords

We need a new anthem
That the poor, the rich
The invisible and quieted ones
Can sing

An anthem that stands
Against the system
Built by hands
That betrayed its words
As they steal and hoard
In hordes

So we can all join
What's going on
What's going
There's shooting, there's looting
There's a war, there's the poor
There's the sick
The rich, sell outs
And those buying it
There are those bought out
And those caught out
In the cold

Can't buy into that American Dream
It's come with a price tag
The Dream
Is bigger than a yacht and a car
More than a condo on the beach
And more than Hollywood stars
It's more than the moons you reach
It's something said
In a hushed whisper
Because it could slip away
It's an ideal

We Need a New Anthem

Something to fight for
It's the New World

So, for the New World
We need a new anthem
An anthem we can all sing
The slaves set free
And the free that bleed
The oppressed and their oppressors
Joining all in a chorus

Or maybe we can sing the same one
But we have got to bleed it
We've got to put it through fire
And refine it
We've got to forgive
And reconcile
All the while
We don't forget
What it has meant
To some
And to few
But sing it loud
So that the song of a few
Can be the tune of many

And then, the old will become new
And we'll have a new anthem
A new anthem we'll all sing.

Can you believe?

Edwin Estevez

Redemption

Last night on the lower east side of Manhattan I found myself in a conversation with two strangers. Strangers to me, anyway, they knew each other, and once loved each other, she whispered in my ear. Our conversation took an interesting turn. We talked of Jesus, and she asked me, "Do you think it matters what people believe? I think the Unitarian Church is beautiful, a place that celebrates all religions and all diversity of beliefs." I affirmed her point of view, for acceptance was safer than rejection. "But," I said. "There is something unique about Jesus. If Jesus truly did what the Bible said that he did, well then there is nothing more compelling or riveting." She leaned into me and said, "I agree, nothing more beautiful." "Nothing," I said. We both sat nodding, looking beyond each other and swallowed hard the alcohol that etched through time and space bringing me for a quick second to a fire of when I was fully gripped by the redemption of this Jesus.

I made my way back to New Jersey, where home is. I exited my small neighborhood train and walked up the leaf littered sidewalk, enjoying the deep red leaves the most. And, like a shove from behind, while listening to Rilo Kiley of all things, it hit me. It dawned on me. I cannot receive it, like a message from the very hand of God. I understood that I cannot receive the redemption offered to me. The redemption I already found in Jesus the Christ. Redemption. This redemption bounces off of me, I reject it, I run, running in circles, the same circles. Redemption I cannot hold it or ingest it as my own, only push it away like a lie, a misplaced ideology of hope.

It is not that I believe redemption is impossible, for I have seen it in the lives of others and even in my own. But, when it comes down to it, when I am faced with my most irritating demons I do not want to trust in the process of redemption, God comes and turns you inside out, and touches your open wounds. I, like the Israelites in the book of Exodus want to run to Aaron and ask for an immediate solution instead of waiting for God to show up. I want to fix myself with the quickest stimulate of shopping or the depressant of a one-night stand, erect my own gold calf to worship. Clearly, God had brought the Israelites out of slavery and they were finally free, and redeemed; they were a new people. And, God saved me from masters that have enslaved me. But, as the Israelites when I have to face the challenge of facing a deeper layer of myself I am reminded that I am still wandering in the desert; waiting for the Promised Land. And, just as they were tired and worried, so am I. My thirst for wholeness and my search for shade have interfered with believing that God can make a way for me. What if God did not show up, and they wandered for the rest of their lives in the hot, dry, empty desert? How could they be sure? And, how can I?

The sun has set now, the darkness enters and I sit contemplating the disappearing light and this free redemption. I cautiously approach. It is offered inclusively, and it lurks, like a settled breeze. It is placed before me. But, I sit only opening my mouth to drink in sweet red wine and sit alone in my badlands, fearing the best and laughing at the worst. See, I have been less and I've been more. And, now, I just am. I just am. The dusk settles. It is night. I am alone, and left with an empty glass and a burning cigarette. I surrender, but do not believe. I wonder, but must not hope. I lean into the night and whisper; redemption. I say it again: redemption.

Amy Root

The Music is the Magic

Abbey Lincoln has a song and album entitled *The Music is the Magic*, thus the title of this entry. As a DJ, among the many other things that I do with my life, I love the transforming power of jazz music. On those days when I find some circumstances particularly trying, my opening feature song *Four Women* by Nina Simone empowers, invigorates and energizes me to shift gears and become my altered ego “The Black Girl” – a girl open to the journey of discovering gems in the stacks at a radio station. The lyrics convey the nuanced experiences of Black women in their gradations of skin colors, hair textures, sexualities and identities.

*My skin is black
My arms are long
My hair is wooly
My back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain inflicted again and again
What do they call me?
My name is Aunt Sarah, Aunt Sarah*

Once deemed the anthem of the Afro-American feminist movement, Simone’s lamentation of Black women’s valleys, mountains, twists, and turns goes straight to the heart of the complexities of Black women’s femininity and lives. There’s nothing stagnant about women’s lives in general and Black women’s lives in particular. Relating to the solemn and reflective nature of jazz, listen to the lyrics and sound of Diana Krall, Mary Lou Williams, Esperanza Spalding, Brown Baby Girl, Kristin Gustafson, Somi, Cassandra Wilson, Catherine Russell, Nnenna Freelon, Ella Fitzgerald and all those other unnamed heroines, and each one of them will reveal the story of a woman whose life is “luxuriously lazy” to a woman whose fashion sense falls under the rubric of “eclectic variety.” Women’s lives vary in style, manner, and philosophy, whether it’s Target shopping, being fancy or progressive pragmatism. There are no two women who share identical points of view on anything. Music transforms and converts us into utterly vulnerable beings who are open to a novel occasion, and it doesn’t matter if we are sitting at our desks in the office or in a rocking chair in the midday sun. Music has magic.

Found in every known culture, music varied between time and space. From romantic, socio-political revolutions to protest songs of the Civil Rights Movement, music evolved to become an essential element of human existence. No matter the sentiments and thoughts that music communicates; the circumstances in which listeners engage music; and the arrangements to which music is created, it brings people together. The contrapuntal nature of music means that it is sometimes a messy enterprise. Southern political figures believed certain types of music was so volatile that it was destroying American values by encouraging race mixing; music born of strife and conflict sent slaves to hush harbors in the middle of the night to bring solace to their overworked bodies and exhausted souls; and music so tenderly orchestrated it invokes images of those who woke up early in the morning to prepare a blacksmith shop for a worship experience. Whether it’s the philosophy of jazz, the theology of the blues, the bantering of hip-hop, or the ontological temperament of classical, music is about human relationships and the complicated nature of them.

If Simone's *Four Women* was the Black feminist manifesto, truly her *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free* is the modern day pronunciation of change women desire and deserve in their lives.

*I wish I knew how it would feel to be free.
I wish I could break all the chains holding me.
I wish I could say all the things I should say.
Say 'em loud say 'em clear
for the whole wide world to hear.*

The lyrics reflect efforts by women to redefine and push pass those proscribed limits placed on them by racist, classist, and sexist structures that constantly remind them that any indication of independence or assertion could mean they will end up or remain single. Instead of allowing any ideological parameters to hinder their agency, women use music to give voice to their experiences.

The magic of music speaks to the heart and soul of a community. It is the balm for the mother who just lost her son to gang violence; it smooths the spirit of a woman who finds herself maneuvering through a broken relationship; it motivates a young woman to embrace her freedom and femininity; and it silences the clamor of a life overburdened by the day-to-day responsibilities of work, school and home.

Regina Langley

Love Was Lost, and a Good Thing Too

Love was lost, and a good thing too
for I was beginning to wonder if ever it would
find my way. It was well said, and truly
that only the most perfectly insane would dare
follow it through all the wildernesses
and Capernaums.

Any fool with a sweater vest and cheap cologne
can saunter through Gesthemane until
his tears fall like stones;
but who is crazy enough to burn his feet
in the hot stinking desert?
He will go with the courage of his utter insanity,
and once there will see that love has indeed lost
him, leaving him to nurse the sores.

And when he is sure that only his echo
returns his call, he will climb to the top
of the temple-
and throw himself down.

Jordan Burdge

Missed Connections

To the woman whose gaze made me stop and wonder-
What is a man that you should make so much of him?
You were wearing all the things that make me guess
Your face spoke of compassion I have only heard rumor of
Your hair made me think of lazy summer afternoons

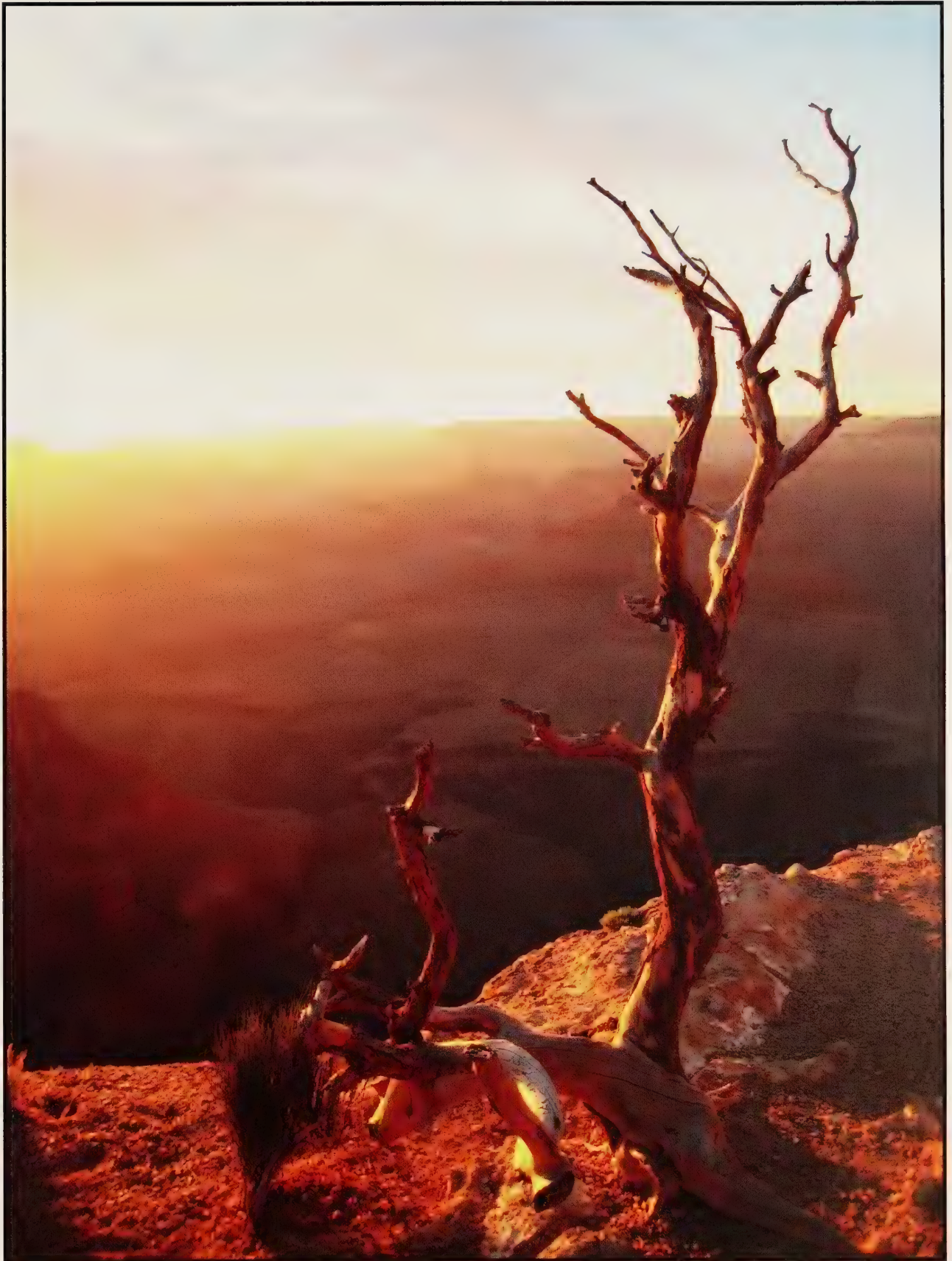
You laughed, and my heart didn't skip a beat
It didn't stop
No, no that backstabber got up and left, certain there was no longer a place left for it in me
It was right

You may not remember me you strong one whose voice comfort and demands
I saw you on the
Train/in the park/at broad and walnut/at a party/in the bank/at the party/at the show/in
wawa/at my boy's place...
Ok, I've seen you EVERYWHERE
You are woman and I see you all the time

Like I said you may not remember me
I don't command attentions, and I could only pray that what may have caught your eye
would be quickly forgotten
I am not exactly striking, unless you are thinking of out
I am more rolled then chiseled, I look like my origins had more in common with dough
rather than marble
I excel at those things I must not do:
Belching, farting, being too honest with you
I fail at those things which would do me good:
Charm, romance, diplomacy, health, finances, life

It is maybe a good thing I have slipped your mind
BUT I am sincere, even when those emotions are uncalled for I really do feel them
I can't offer you the moon, I might not be there when you call, I may not make you feel like a
natural woman, and I can't even put a ring on it
I would promise you all I have,
But that's mostly debt, both to man and God, and I save most of my burdens for the second
date

In fact, in the interest of time, I better get this out of the way now,
I am deeply and truly sorry for all of the following:
Forgetting your birthday, forgetting your mom's name, forgetting your dad's name, forget-
ting your siblings name, forgetting our anniversary, losing my job, hurting your feelings,
dropping the ball, farting in bed, farting in public, farting at dinner, farting in



The Glow in the Wilderness
Kelly Roman

Lost and Found

all hope is lost
sounds so dramatic
we reserve the phrase for heartbroken romantics, upturned hand resting on furrowed brow.
no, losing hope is a more absent-minded kind of thing.
true, there are moments when hope flies dramatically from hands-clutching-hands
when the diagnosis falls from the doctor's mouth, quiet, and heavy.
when the nurse hands you a plastic baggie, wedding ring and watch inside.
but more often, hope just kind of slips away, unnoticed

as cynicism begins to make more and more sense, disguising itself as realism,
you loosen your hold on hope
and eventually misplace it
among the spare papers and receipts, the textbooks and dirty laundry
it just kind of slips away, unnoticed.

unnoticed, until that day when a sadness
or a memory, or a loss, or a failure
monumental or miniscule
finally breaks your back
and that handy cynicism only helps your back crumple in on itself

and so you remember that sometimes hope used to help
used to hold you up under the weight
used to make your blood pump with conviction through your veins,
determined to keep living, and live well
and you reach out for hope, wondering why it's not in your hand anymore

and it's not there. your hand comes back empty, clutching air.

all your hope is lost.

your cynicism won't help you now
and with hands empty and back broken
your fragile fingers start searching, slowly but with urgency

and the funny thing about hope
is that just 'cause you lose it doesn't mean it's gone

it's right where you left it, waiting, hoping you find it, hoping you find hope.
unlike joy, which bubbles up effervescently
unlike love, which makes itself known through touch
unlike peace, which settles down deep in the gut
unlike faith, which wiggles its way into you and fills your lungs with new air

hope is something steely, and solid, resilient.

it is not easily killed, indeed, it fights the fiercest fight to remain alive.
hope is something that exists even when you can't see it
even when your hand has forgotten what it feels like to hold it.

it exists. and its patience is infinite.
it awaits your searching fingers,
fragile though they may be.

Rebecca Blake

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